Original Research Article

The influence of cultural blogs on their readers' cultural product choices

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A B S T R A C T

While some conceptual studies have highlighted the impact that Web 2.0 technology and social media have on cultural industries, empirical evidence is still missing. Specifically, no study has considered the role of cultural bloggers, who mediate the information flows from cultural organizations to consumers. To fill this gap, this paper suggests and tests a model that explains blog readers' intentions to consume cultural products suggested by the blog. The findings from a sample of 215 cultural blog readers show that the impact of the blog on reader intention to consume the products suggested by the blog is strongly influenced by reader engagement with the blog. In addition, the results highlight the effects of content quality, enjoyment, and homophily. The implications of these findings for bloggers and for organizations communicating through bloggers are discussed in detail.

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1. Introduction

Until recently, cultural organizations have, to a large extent, ignored the potential of Web 2.0 technologies and services and resisted their adoption. However, there is now a widespread awareness that these technologies can transform cultural organizations, making them able to face some relevant trends challenging cultural industries (Capriotti, Carretón, & Castillo, 2016; Padilla-Meléndez and del Águila-Obra, 2013).

First, the increase in the number of competing cultural organizations and products makes it difficult to gain differentiation and establish relationships with potential customers through the traditional one-way communication. Second, cultural organizations are experiencing increasing challenges in reaching and engaging young generations. Third, the integration of the internet into the consumption of cultural products is becoming one of the major trends in the cultural industries.

To address these issues, cultural organizations have started developing specific strategies for effectively using Web 2.0 technologies with a focus on social media. Nonetheless, only a few studies have documented this process (Capriotti et al., 2016; Gombault, Allal-Chérif, & Décamps, 2016), and, surprisingly, they contain no evidence about cultural organizations' communication of their products through digital influencers, i.e., bloggers. Previous research from the information management domain highlights that

companies have recognized the power of bloggers and the importance of engaging with them (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). According to the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), opinion leaders such as bloggers mediate messages because they elaborate media information they receive and then pass it to other people, thus enhancing its influence. To what extent this phenomenon extends to cultural industries is still unknown.

The purpose of this study it to understand whether cultural blogs managed by independent cultural bloggers have an influence on their readers' selection of the cultural products for consumption. A model is developed and tested that posits that a reader's intention to consume a cultural product suggested by the blog is influenced by three factors: reader attitude toward the contents of the blog, enjoyment experienced in visiting the blog, and perceived similarity between the reader and the blog. Moreover, engagement with the blog is modeled as a mediator of these relationships.

This research contributes to both theory and practice. The results of this study demonstrate the importance of mediated communication (through bloggers) in cultural industries. As a consequence, they stress the importance for organizations supplying cultural products to collaborate with cultural bloggers, which represents an important means to reaching wider audiences and influencing their behaviors. In addition, the findings may be relevant also for organizations on all contexts in which blogs and bloggers play an important role in mediating communication.

The remainder of the paper is articulated as follows: first, the relevant literature is reviewed, the methodology of the study is

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described, and the results are presented and discussed. Finally, the discussion of findings and their limitations completes the study.

2. Research background and theoretical foundation

In the last few years, technology exerted a profound influence on the evolution of cultural organizations (Gombault et al., 2016), enabling the creation of online and on-site valuable experiences for the audience (Choi & Kim, 2016) and the implementation of interactive communication (Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013). In particular, Web 2.0 technologies played a pivotal role in cultural industries due to the nature itself of cultural products (Capriotti et al., 2016).

Cultural industries "produce experience goods with considerable creative elements and aim these at the consumer market via mass distribution" (Peltoniemi, 2015, p. 41). Therefore, they include film, music, book, magazine publishing, TV, radio, and fashion. Cultural products are relevant to a range of issues in philosophy, aesthetics, history, sociology, politics, and many other disciplines (Throsby, 1994). They are more abstract, have less functional utility, and are experienced more subjectively than other products (Bourgeon-Renault, 2000). Hence, establishing the market potential of cultural products is difficult, because nobody knows their actual content before consuming them (Caves, 2000; Goldman, 1983; Peltoniemi, 2015). In addition, consumers of cultural products cannot base their purchasing and consumption decisions only on the utilitarian value of the offering, which is actually very low (Peltoniemi, 2015). On the contrary, they need to appreciate the aesthetic (Hirsch, 1972); symbolic (DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007; Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale, & Cohen, 2008); social display (Bourdieu, 1984); and experiential value of those cultural products (Peltoniemi, 2015). Therefore, selecting which cultural products to consume (e.g., exhibitions to visit or books to read), and deriving benefits from their consumption, may be quite complex for consumers (Brito & Barros, 2005). In particular, consumers have to engage in a cultivation-of-taste process to select and enjoy these products (Brito & Barros, 2005).

Hence, communication plays a pivotal role in helping potential consumers understand the intrinsic value of cultural products (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2014). Nonetheless, communicating cultural products in a way that is accessible and able to engage a larger public is a complex task for the producers of cultural products (Peltoniemi, 2015). These difficulties are even emphasized when cultural organizations intend to reach and engage young generations (Gonzalez, Llopis, & Gasco, 2015; Katz-Gerro, 2011). Moreover, establishing direct contact with consumers is made difficult by the presence of gatekeepers, who filter the communication and distribution flow of cultural products from the creator to the market (e.g., media and retailers) (De Beukelaer, 2015; Hirsch, 1972; Hirsch, 2000). Web 2.0 platforms such as social media and blogs have the potential to facilitate communication regarding cultural products (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013). In addition, these platforms enable the spread of information through word of mouth, which has been indicated as a very important tool in cultural industries (Hausmann, 2012).

Blogs are one of the most popular Web 2.0 platforms (Hsu & Tsou, 2011) and can be classified as personal (or organizationally unaffiliated) or organization sponsored (e.g., a museum-sponsored blog) (Capriotti et al., 2016; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). In this study, we address unaffiliated blogs, as their role has been completely overlooked by the available research related to cultural industries (Gombault et al., 2016).

Personal blogs are "diary-style web sites" (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 622) on which bloggers post their opinions, reviews, ideas, personal stories, and emotions (Chau and Xu, 2012; Huang, 2015;

Cosenza, Solomon, & Kwon, 2015; Uribe, Buzeta, & Velásquez, 2016). Blogs specializing in specific themes such as fashion, tourism, sports, and culture provide detailed and updated information. Several studies have shown that blogs, compared to other media, are more dynamic and are perceived as more reliable and credible than both traditional and other online sources by users (Cosenza et al., 2015; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007; Tsai & Men, 2013). In fact, bloggers act as opinion leaders who, as stated by the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), mediate the transmission of information, increasing its influence (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). In particular, previous evidence shows that blogs have a significant influence on the decision-making processes of consumers purchasing experiential products, such as tourism (Tan & Chang, 2016) or wine (Cosenza et al., 2015). As for other experience goods, cultural product blogs have the potential to become influential sources of information (Huang, 2015). Therefore, cultural organizations may decide to communicate cultural products through digital influencers (i.e., cultural bloggers). In this perspective, cultural blogs can be considered a sort of infomediary that offers informational services (del Águila-Obra, Padilla-Meléndez, & Serarols-Tarrés, 2007). However, available research has not addressed this issue so far.

Following this reasoning, hereafter we investigate the role of personal cultural blogs by developing a model that explains the influence of blogs on their readers' decisions about which cultural products to consume.

3. Model and hypotheses

Consistent with previous research on the effects of customer engagement with social media on customer behaviors (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014), our model posits that engagement with the blog plays a pivotal role in explaining a reader's decision to follow the recommendations provided by the blog. Engagement indicates the intensity of the relationships between the reader and the blog (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013) based on interactivity (Baker, Donthu, & Kumar, 2016; Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2016). In detail, engagement is defined as the result of a "psychological process" (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013) that involves hedonic, utilitarian, and social aspects of consumer attitudes (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Huang, 2015). Hence, in our research, we model engagement as a mediator of the impact that consumer's perceptions about a blog's utilitarian, hedonic, and social benefits have on the intention to consume the products suggested by the blog (Fig. 1).

3.1. Perceived enjoyment

Previous research has suggested that perceived enjoyment is a strong antecedent of a consumer's attitude toward social media (Shao, 2009; Turel & Serenko, 2012). Enjoyment is defined as "the extent to which the activity is perceived to be enjoyable in its own right, apart from any performance consequences that may be anticipated" (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992, p. 1113). Therefore, it registers the components of the consumer's attitude toward the experiential value (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). According to Kozinets (2008, p. 879), social media not only offer practical advancements and benefits but also represent "a road to pleasure." Specifically, the available evidence suggests that perceived enjoyment is positively related to consumer attitudes, including satisfaction with blogs (Shiau & Luo, 2013) and engagement (Turel & Serenko, 2012). Enjoyment derives from the experience of spending time on the blog and having fun (Hu, Kettinger, & Poston, 2015; Venkatesan & Farris, 2012). Therefore, it is fundamental that users intrinsically enjoy their experience with social media (Calder, Malthouse,